

# HEXENJAEGER

Rory

## CHAPTER 1

### The Cloven Cavalcade

*“I only glanced into the abyss, and I don’t think it got a good look at me.”*

*-Felix DeWinter, Canis Dei “The Hound of God”*

Anno Domini MCDXXXIII

Rome was a decaying carcass. Once the heart of an empire, it was now little more than a gutter—filled with the collected shit and piss of a million pilgrims. The only evidence of its once proud past was sealed away in the Church, a place where muck and slime seemingly wicked from its immaculate bastions, hoarded by covetous priests afflicted with their own plagues of corruption, greed, and contemptible ambition. For even in Rome, the holiest of cities, the Devil’s hand was never far from the throats of the pious.

Felix DeWinter rode slowly through the crumbling outskirts of the city, a grim figure beneath the stretching shadows of a sinking September sun.

From under a weather-stained hood, his eyes, cold as hailstones, took in the streets around him—women sweeping dust from their stoops and merchants shuttering their shops for the day. Beside him, tethered by a frayed rope tied to his saddle, trotted a goat. Its coat was black, with white stripes in a v-shape down its face that mirrored the spiraling horns atop its head—common features in all Toggenburger goats. Hanging from its chin was a long tuft of hair that gave the appearance of a goatee. It trundled along, its haunches swaying rhythmically side to side, unbothered by the week-long trek.

Felix had been sent by the College of Cardinal Bishops to retrieve a goat in a small village on the Swiss border. The villagers had petitioned the Vatican for aid, and were near hysteria when he

arrived. A talking goat, they claimed—a demon in animal form that whispered blasphemies in the dead of night, wilting crops with its foul breath, and souring milk with bewitching stares. Felix had scoffed at the idea. He'd heard of many things in his years serving the Church, but a talking goat seemed more like the ravings of simple minds than a genuine threat to the faithful.

Yet, orders were orders. The cardinals had sent him to investigate.

When the complex chess board of ecclesiastical politicking needed a blunt instrument, they had pawns in abundance, but when discretion was required, Felix DeWinter was their silent scalpel—the bishop they moved on the board. As a penitent, his path to redemption was paved with such duties—witch hunts, sabotage, assassinations. All done in secrecy. He choked down thoughts of his unspeakable past malefactions, the kind the Church was so eager to possess for themselves. Now he only lived to serve, and serve well, until his soul was worthy of forgiveness.

The scuffle to claim the goat had been brief but not without some brutality. The villagers, half-mad with fear, had refused to let it leave their village alive. They claimed the beast had cursed their lands, its malevolent whispers creeping through their shutters at night, poisoning their thoughts and corrupting their kin. Felix had dealt with worse, and a few sharp blows from the flat of his smallsword had been enough to cow them into submission. He took the goat, bound its mouth shut to silence any devilish whispers, and made haste back to Rome.

Felix and his cloven captive approached St. Peter's Basilica, built atop the foundations of Nero's circus. Beside it stood the obelisk, stolen from Egypt and erected by Caligula a millennium earlier. Madmen both. Before it was called the Vatican, it was a swamp beside the Tiber where all refuse flowed—in many ways it still was.

Felix tugged at the rope, dragging the reluctant billy goat through the grand gates and into the building's hallowed halls, each adorned with breathtaking frescoes of angels, instruments held aloft, and fat little cherubs, all masterfully painted and finished in gold leaf. The goat, head held high with a defiance that was curious for an animal, clopped along beside him, its hooves echoing off the cold marble floor.

The cardinals were mingling in a dimly-lit chamber filled with flickering candles and wearing crimson vestments topped with silk skullcaps and thin, wide-brimmed hats. The cardinal bishop, dean and leader of the lot, sat in a golden chair on plush cushions. The others stood and communed amongst themselves, grumbling over divine mandates that would see them grow their influence.

They reminded Felix of clucking hens who all thought themselves the rooster. Felix brushed back his hood and bowed deeply, trying to ignore the goat's bleating, which seemed to grow louder in the chamber.

"DeWinter," hailed the cardinal bishop, Giordano Orsini, his voice haughty with nasally condescension. "You bring us the cursed creature?" Rising from his gilded seat adorned in pearls, rubies, and other shining jewels, he moved hastily towards the two shabby figures, his slippers scraping across the floor.

"Aye, Your Eminence," Felix replied, his voice respectful but weary. "Though cursed, I am not sure. It talks, they told me. Whispered to them in the dead of night. But all it's done since it came into my custody is bleat incessantly like any other goat."

The goat, as if understanding the exchange, let out a particularly loud and indignant bleat, stomping its hooves on the floor.

Another cardinal came forward. "Do you believe it bewitched?" Moving towards the goat and leaning forward, he peered at the animal with suspicion, his own long face and black goatee a perfect match. "Hideous," he sneered.

Felix shrugged. "I believe the villagers were indeed afraid. But was their invective and ire mistakenly placed upon an innocent beast through ignorance? I cannot say for certain. But I think it likely."

The cardinal bishop raised his voice again, "But can it speak?"

"I have no evidence to the contrary."

The cardinal bishop frowned, his gaze shifting between Felix and the goat. "Yet they beseeched us for aid. They feared this creature enough to send for our help. You, Canis Dei, who has hunted witches and demons across the breadth of Christendom. Do you think these simple folk would lie?"

Felix bristled. "I do not. They believe, aye. But men believe many things when harvests go bad and plague tears through their hearths. A desperate man will believe anything. Sometimes it's easier to put blame on a thing you can see."

"Then let us see for ourselves," the cardinal bishop said, his voice hardening. He stepped forward, bending down over the goat in his long red robe, golden jewelry hanging from his neck. "Speak, creature, and reveal your master!" He squinted his eyes in cold seriousness. "Be it Satan?"

The goat blinked, its expression unreadable. For a long moment, the chamber was filled with nothing but the empty silence of wearing patience. Then, the goat tilted its head and let out a long, low bleat. The sound rang through the chamber, empty of all meaning, and utterly ordinary.

The cardinal bishop tried again, his Roman nose just inches away from the goat this time, “I command you, speak!” He shot a sideways glance at the animal, and then tried French. “Ou en français, si vous préférez, diable de chèvre!” And then in Latin, “Lingua sacra te combustit?”

The goat seemed not to know English, French, or Latin. Felix could not blame the creature for not knowing Latin—the declensions could be challenging to memorize.

The cardinals exchanged glances, their suspicion giving way to doubt. Felix couldn’t help but allow a wry smile. The cardinal bishop turned to Felix, his expression dripping with frustration. “Is this your idea of a jest, DeWinter?”

Felix held his ground. “No jest, Your Eminence.”

Another cardinal, far in the back, spoke out, “Are we certain this is the right goat?”

The goat, as if in response, bleated again, louder this time, and stomped its hooves with a stubbornness that bordered on comical. One of the younger cardinals snorted, barely able to contain his laughter.

The cardinal bishop scowled, his patience worn thin. “Enough of this nonsense. If the creature refuses to speak to me before God, then it surely cannot, and then it is not bewitched, and this is no work of the Devil. Come, DeWinter. I have more pressing matters to discuss.”

Felix's heart sank. He had hoped for some reprieve, some rest after the grueling journey through the Alps so late in the year, but the cardinal bishop’s tone left no room for argument.

“Very well,” Felix said, bowing his head once more. “What would you have me do?”

“Tell me, DeWinter—what do you see when you look at me?”

Felix kept his expression neutral as he answered the riddle. “I see Your Eminence.”

“You see wealth. You see authority.” Orsini's fingers traced the pearls at his throat. “The French see the same. Until they stop believing. We must remind them why Rome rules, and the sheep kneels.” The cardinal bishop stepped closer, lowering his voice so only Felix could hear. “We are in need of miracles, DeWinter. The flock is losing faith, and even now schisms arise. It is imperative we find proof of divinity, and that we possess it. You are to go to Normandy. There is something there, something of great importance to the Church. We have received word of a... holy relic.”

Felix frowned. “What sort of relic—”

“The sort that doesn't concern a hound.” Orsini leaned forward. “Fetch it. Bring it back to Rome safely. Do this, and your penance will be well on its way to absolution.”

Felix nodded. "As you wish, Your Eminence. But how will I know what to bring if I do not know what this relic be?"

Orsini held out an upturned finger. "There is an abbey a mile off the coast of Northern France. That is where our relic lies."

"Why not have them bring it here?"

"The French are in disarray after the death of their bannerette, and every abbey in France screams for help. There is no safe passage through France."

"The d'Arc girl is dead?"

"She was burned for heresy."

"Then they have turned a maid into a martyr."

"Her trial and execution was not sanctioned by our church. The English pervert our will and undermine our authority. The relic cannot fall into their hands. Go to Normandy."

"The English control Normandy."

"Yes, and Paris. And much of the countryside has fallen into civil war. If it were a simple task, I would not be giving it to you."

"A journey that far will require financing."

The cardinal bishop recoiled, as if offended by the mere mention of money. "Do this kindness, and your soul just might be saved, Felix DeWinter."

Retrieving a small coin purse from beneath his robe, the cardinal bishop carefully measured out a few florins then tossed the pouch to Felix who caught it in a raised fist. Felix had a distaste for the casual use of gold coins by the clergy. He would need to trade them for the more common lira to buy supplies, which the French called livre, and the English translate from its Latin meaning to pound—each lira being worth a pound of Roman silver.

"And the goat?"

The cardinal bishop waved a dismissive hand. "It is blasphemous for such a low animal to be within a house of God, and I will not have it fouling these holy halls with its presence. Take it with you."

"What am I to do with it?"

“Your intentions are your own.” The head cardinal turned, returning to his golden throne. “I suggest a red wine marinade to soften up the meat—goat can be tough. I hear it’s a delicacy in Portugal.”

Felix shouted out a reply, “I don’t know if I’ve had goat.”

“It tastes like mutton. Now go with God.” And with a wave of his jeweled hand, Felix was dismissed.

He bit back a sigh and dipped his head once more. He took the rope at the goat's neck in hand and led the stubborn beast out of the chamber. The sound of its bleating followed him as he exited the building through its grand church doors and out onto the black cobblestone roads. Night had come, and the sun had all but disappeared over the horizon.

Inns did not display their names—pilgrims were so often illiterate. Instead, they used imagery above their doors. This one bore the sign of a blue fox. Felix knew it, and unsurprisingly, it was indeed called The Blue Fox. It was a welcome sight after the long journey. Felix tied his horse to a post, and before he could find a place to put the goat, it promptly leapt atop the horse and stood there, staring down at him from atop of the saddle.

"You'll be mutton stew if you keep this up," Felix muttered darkly, though he knew he wouldn't follow through with it. The goat was maddening, but it was also strangely endearing. Anything that made the cardinals flustered was worth keeping around—for now.

He tossed it one last look, waiting for it to speak. There was no response. Felix shook his head, casting away idle fantasies, then continued inside for much-needed rest.

The innkeeper was jovial and welcoming, a pudgy man with sleeves pulled up to his armpits revealing thick black hair covering his shoulders all the way down to the the backs of his hands. Felix bought a room for the night, a private one, which cost extra, and some feed for his horse. After exchanging all but one of his gold florins with the innkeeper, Felix snapped his fingers, and requested two carrots.

Returning outside, Felix gave one carrot to his horse, a large but lean destrier he had named Castigar, and offered the other to the goat. The goat did not immediately take the offering, choosing instead to stare at Felix, its eyes shone like polished jasper in the moonlight.

“I promise it’s not poisoned.” Felix placed his hand on the head of the goat and patted it firmly. “What should I call you?” A wry smile carved its way across Felix’s face, “How about Mutton?”

The goat recoiled, seemingly to taking offense.

Standing defiantly atop his horse, the goat reminded Felix of Julius Caesar on his chariot, parading through these same city streets after a triumph centuries before—showered in cheers

and flower petals in his victory procession. Felix thought for a moment, and then offered the carrot again. "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's."

The goat accepted.

"Caesar, then."

The inn's upstairs room was small but clean and illuminated by a single candle melted down almost completely to a brass dish. The bed was sweat-stained linen stuffed with hay, but it was soft enough and a welcome relief. Felix removed his knee-high boots fixed with spurs one at a time and then stripped to his long shirt. The corner of the headboard held his belt, which contained a Hussite-made pistol he kept loaded with a single lead ball, and an arm's length smallsword with a silver hilt. He ran his hands through his hair, straightening it with his fingers, and settled onto the straw mattress.

Not long after a deep sleep had seized him, a voice—low and insistent—whispered in his ear.

"Wake up."

Felix's eyes snapped open—every sense on high alert. He reached for the pistol, still hanging from the headboard, and readied it as the door creaked open. Three shadows slipped into the room, long knives glinting in the dim light. Assassins.

In a single, fluid motion trained through a career of violence, Felix rolled from the bed and fired. A furious conflagration of sparks and milk-white smoke erupted from the firing mechanism, blinding him momentarily. The first man dropped, the lead ball penetrating deep into his neck. Blood poured in an arc from the wound like a pierced cask of claret, gushing in rhythm with his faltering heartbeat. It was fatal. The second lunged, but Felix was faster, twisting back and drawing his sword from its sheath on the headboard and driving it through the man's chest.

The third hesitated, but only for a moment. Felix's blade found him before he could take another step, the steel cutting through flesh and bone with grim precision. That's why Felix preferred the smallsword over the Spanish rapier. Rapiers were overly long, flashy—bad in close quarters. The wider, shorter blade of the smallsword made the steel more durable, and every cut was twice as wide, slicing through double the internal organs. Although that did tend to result in twice the blood—twice the viscera.

Silence fell over the room, save only Felix's heavy breathing. He wiped the blood from his sword on a dead man and peered into the darkness around him, surveying the scene and listening for any others. He was safe, for now. Who had sent them? They looked to be peasantry—short, stocky people with skin tanned and shriveled by the sun. They were not professional killers. Not like him.

He turned toward the open window, his instincts telling him there was more to this than a simple attempt on his life. But before he could investigate further, a familiar sound reached his ears—a low, mocking bleat from the street below.

Felix froze. That voice... Caesar could talk.